

Carpe Diem

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Last week, my sermon was titled “Tempus Fugit.” Don’t worry, this naming sermons after Latin aphorisms is not going to continue ad infinitum. It’s just that “Carpe Diem” just seemed a logical follow-up title from last week’s title. “Tempus fugit,” you will recall, is usually translated into English as “Time flies.” A more accurate translation from the Latin, however, would be “Time flees.” The difference between the two translations may seem minor, but upon close inspection the difference between “flying” and “fleeing speaks for itself.

This week, I’m doing something similar with the phrase, “Carpe Diem,” which is usually translated into English as “Seize the day.” Many of us recall the phrase from the 1989 film “*The Dead Poet’s Society*,” starring Robin Williams. As was the case with “Tempus Fugit,” this phrase could be translated a bit differently from its popular iteration, with the meaning “to breathe the breath of life,” or to “make the most of the present.”

At the end of last week’s sermon I asked us all to follow the admonition to “love our lives,” or to love our fate” – Nietzsche’s “Amor Fati” – for when we look back on our lives, most of us will see that the decisions we’ve made, the opportunities we’ve lost or found, would not be any different given the circumstances we’ve experienced, even if we were to live our lives all over again. This is not, of course, to say that the various accidents, illnesses and other twists of fate are not to be dismissed from the Big Picture of our lives; but the ways in which we’ve reacted to them tell a lot,

On this Sunday of the Annual Meeting, with only three more Sundays left in the program year, I thought this discussion of “Carpe Diem” might be appropriate not only for us in this room as we go about living our individual lives, but for us as a congregation. “Seizing the Day” might be just the thing, as we enter the future that awaits us. And enter it we shall, whether we like it

or not. Or if “seizing” sounds a little too harsh, how about to “breathe the breath of life,” and make the most of the present.

But how do we do this? We do it many ways, but one of the most important of those ways is what we do in our Sunday worship services.” Each Sunday we affirm our fellowship with the words, “May we be reminded here of our highest aspirations, and inspired to bring our gifts of love and service to the altar of humanity.” And at the end of the service, we say, Let this flame remain with us, a symbol of the holiness we seek, dispelling the gloom, lighting a path to faith and hope, its radiance calling us to wholeness, casting the light of freedom, justice and peace upon the world.”

These are noble words of faith. They call us out to new and wondrous lives; they spur us on to an adventure in living fully. A Hindu proverb says, “A person consists of [his or her] faith. Whatever is [his or her] faith, even so is [he or she]. Or as Josiah Royce has said, “Religious faith, indeed, relates to that which is above us, but it must arise from that which is within us.” Our faith – what we believe – is an integral component of who and what we are.

“Carpe Diem?” Seize the day? It’s an invitation that comes to us every morning. There are days for each of us, of course, when we wake up willing to do a little day-seizing, but when we get up, go out, and close the door into that unknown territory into which we’ve entered, we may well want to turn around and head back into the house saying something such as “What was I thinking? I can’t do this!” This is when reality seems to sneak up and ambush our good intentions and go to the “one step forward, two steps back” mentality.

A few months ago I read a review of a book by Christian Wiman, who is the Editor of Poetry Magazine, the oldest poetry journal in the country. Mr. Wiman’s book is titled “My Bright Abyss.” It’s a memoir of his struggle with faith following his diagnosis of cancer seven years ago. One of the many pithy sentences in the book is: “Faith steals upon you like dew; some days you wake and it is there. And like dew it gets burned off in of rising sun of anxieties, ambitions, and distractions.”

Seize the day? Good luck with that! We're far more likely to turn right around and walk right up to that door through which we'd passed only a minute ago. But this is just the place where the other translations of Carpe Diem can come into the picture: ". . . breathe the breath of life," and make the most of the present." These are a little more passive, aren't they? Were we to follow these second translations, it just may bring us back to the place where we want to be but can't quite get there – a place that, even in a time of darkest clouds, keeps trying to bring the sun into our lives. And there's always light, just asking us to illuminate our world, a world that only we can create only by accepting who we are, where we are, how we are, and put it all together. Sometimes it's just a matter of opening our eyes, of looking. If our eyes are clouded over in anxiety, we don't get the whole picture.

Friederich Nietzsche, who's become one of my favorite resources of poetic wisdom over the years, wrote these words: "As long as you still experience the stars as 'above' you, you lack the eye of knowledge." My interpretation of this is that, when we look up at the night sky (as I do frequently on my late-night dog walks), we see the stars above, in all their transcendent glory. But the stars are not just "above," they are all around us, maybe out of sight from where we might be at a given moment, out of sight and able to be seen only on the other side of the planet, but they're nonetheless present – all around us, whether we take heed of that or not. The mystery of infinity is out there, full of surprises and lofty thoughts.

What does any of us really know about the depths of life? How do we go about living fully, if we are unable to see, or if we don't even try to pay attention to that we can't see, but we know is there? How can we exist fully, without "breathing the breathe of life, taking in all of life's wonder.?" A daunting objective isn't it? Daunting, yes, but not altogether impossible.

This is where what we're doing here in this room comes in. At least it's one of the reasons we're here – family, community, congregation – these are the things that define and articulate who we are. Throughout our lives we bring into this room on Sunday mornings. We come here for any number of reasons, but I'm hopeful that for all of us, we come to further define who we are, why we are, and what we are. And, this is a lifetime mission. Our Kearsarge Unitarian Universalist Fellowship is a gathering of human beings who are finding their place in

the world. Paramount in this whole business, of course, is that each of us has a unique identity that is precious not just to ourselves, but to the whole community.

A few weeks ago, Stephanie and I were finishing a dinner at a Chinese restaurant, when I received an auspicious reminder to keep searching for the self and faith that we talk about seeking. This serendipitous reminder came out of a fortune cookie (which I think is maybe a long lost cousin of the astrological chart, but way down the line in terms of ultimate value). But I was very pleased with the fortune I'd received. This is what it said: "The best thing you can do is to get good at being you."

"... to get good at being you." I like that little piece of advice. It makes sense to me. Too many of us spend our lives trying to get good at being what people would like us to be – which, of course, can come in handy if we want to maintain family, friendships, work, or neighborhood relationships. An important aspect of being fully human is to know who we are, and part of knowing who we are is found in taking that first step, to take the leap into the world that awaits us.

I have one more little thing to share with you in this conversation. This may seem a little esoteric to you, but it's something that's made an impression to me. Most of you know that I enjoy movies; they come up from time to time in my sermons. Several years ago I saw a movie called "Junebug," starring Amy Adams, and directed by Phil Morrison. I'm not going to give you a synopsis, but I'd like to share something that Mr. Morrison did that intrigued me in the film. What this was, was that every time the characters in a given scene moved from one room to another, he, Mr. Morrison, paused after they'd left, and kept his focus on the doorway through which the characters had exited, and the empty room they'd left behind, for as long, as I recall, as three to four seconds. For me, that little directorial nudge left me intrigued, fascinated, and impressed by a kind of eerie, philosophical statement of what leaving one place and going into another can mean. Think about it.

Meanwhile, let's all stay tuned and listen to our lives. Let's see what happens when we enter the world of "seizing the day," of "breathing the breath of life," of "making the most of the present."

And "Carpe Diem" to us all!